

VZCZCXRO7096
RR RUEHPB
DE RUEHSV #0255/01 1831820
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 021820Z JUL 06
FM AMEMBASSY SUVA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3154
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0030
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1241
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 0855
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1032
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHHJJAA/JICPAC HONOLULU HI
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000255

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2016

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPKO](#) [PGOV](#) [FJ](#) [NZ](#)

SUBJECT: FIJI'S MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT TALKING AGAIN

REF: SUVA 109

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DINGER. SECTIONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

1. (C) Representatives of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) and Fiji's Ministry of Home Affairs tell us a June 23 meeting between RFMF Commander Bainimarama and Home Affairs Minister Vosanibola appears to have helped put civil-military relations in Fiji back on the right track. RFMF senior officers who participated said all major outstanding issues were raised, including the RFMF's desire to join the coalition in Iraq. Few definitive decisions were made, but most participants think the cooperative tone could bode well for the future. However, in a private conversation with the Ambassador, Bainimarama sounded much less optimistic. He complained that Vosanibola knows almost nothing about key military issues and should have been replaced as Minister. Bainimarama expressed displeasure about Vosanibola's conversation with New Zealand Minister for Defense Phil Goff on June 22 in which both reportedly endorsed the idea of having Fiji's Supreme Court rule on the RFMF's proper role under the Fiji Constitution. End summary.

RFMF-Home Affairs Meeting: Generally Good Reviews

2. (C) Senior military officers who attended the June 23 reconciliation session between RFMF Commander Bainimarama and Minister of Home Affairs Vosanibola told the Ambassador and DATT June 24 that the event was very useful and positive. The meeting lasted over five hours, with a ceremonial exchange of whales' teeth and lots of kava drinking. RFMF Commander Bainimarama and 15 military officers attended. Minister of Home Affairs Vosanibola, CEO Korovavala and other officials represented the Ministry. At one point, Korovavala reportedly had tears streaming down his face. The officers said virtually all outstanding civil-military issues were discussed. While few definitive decisions were made, the officers were impressed with the cooperative spirit that pervaded the meeting and left feeling good about prospects for improved civil-military relations.

3. (C) At a joint meeting with the Ambassador, DATT, and DCM June 26, Korovavala and RFMF Chief of Staff Teleni agreed that the meeting was very positive. Korovavala said discussion was open and honest, and no issues were evaded. He said a decision has been made by both the ministry and the military to put the past behind them and "head in a new direction."

RFMF Involvement in Iraq

14. (C) One key issue that came up at the RFMF-Home Affairs meetings was the RFMF's desire to join the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq. According to participants, Home Affairs referred to the 2003 government decision stipulating that the RFMF could only participate in UN activities in Iraq. The RFMF argued that the situation in Iraq is now totally different from 2003, when a full-scale war was imminent. The RFMF also noted that the UN has endorsed the Coalition's efforts to combat the insurgency and reconstruct Iraq. Korovavala told us June 26 that the Cabinet has called for a review of Fiji's participation in Iraq and the Sinai, and that a report to the Cabinet is due at the end of August.

Military Will Not be Downsized

15. (C) Korovavala and Teleni said a "defense white paper," which media articles have suggested contains a plan to dramatically downsize the military, was also discussed at the meeting. Korovavala said virtually all reporting on the white paper has been wrong, confusing the as-yet-unwritten defense paper with an already completed "security white paper." Contrary to public perception, he said, the security paper does not talk about military personnel levels. Teleni chimed in, stating that the government has sent word to the RFMF that personnel levels will be maintained. (Note: In a statement June 7, RFMF spokesman Neumi Leweni said that Vosanibola had informed the RFMF that the proposed defense white paper has been set aside. Leweni also referred to

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statements by the Prime Minister during the election campaign stating that there would be no reduction in RFMF strength.)

Funding Request for "Peacekeeping Center"

16. (C) Korovavala and Teleni made a joint pitch for the U.S. to help fund a planned "peacekeeping center" at Black Rock in western Fiji. Both spoke of Fiji's need to provide a centralized training center for troops engaged in peacekeeping activities around the world, and referred to previous U.S. expressions of support for the concept. The Ambassador and DATT said the United States would carefully consider Fiji's request for funds and equipment, noting the extensive assistance we give to the RFMF to help train Fiji peacekeepers. We are helping send a large Fijian contingent to Mongolia to participate in PKO exercises in August. Korovavala said Fiji is very grateful for U.S. military assistance, and he asked for updated dollar figures and details that he could share with the Cabinet and the public. The Ambassador tasked the DATT to provide all appropriate information.

Commander Bainimarama Downplays Meeting with Home Affairs

17. (C) In contrast to the upbeat reports from RFMF senior officers, Commodore Bainimarama downplayed the significance of the RFMF-Home Affairs meeting in a conversation with the Ambassador on June 24. Bainimarama grumbled that, after two years, Vosanibola still knows almost nothing about the front-burner issues that affect the military. Thus, he was not prepared to respond to the RFMF on any important items, including the RFMF's desire to join the coalition in Iraq. Bainimarama complained yet again that Vosanibola relies far too much on CEO Korovavala for policy and decision-making guidance, an inappropriate role for a CEO, who should be more of a conduit for information exchange and dialogue. Bainimarama said the appointment of former RFMF Chief of Staff, Home Affairs CEO, and High Commissioner to Australia Jioji Konrote as Minister of State for Immigration within the

Ministry of Home Affairs is positive. Konrote helped organize the June 23 meeting and participated in it. Bainimarama expressed disappointment that Konrote wasn't picked to replace Vosanibola as Home Affairs Minister.

Displeasure with NZ Minister Goff

18. (C) Bainimarama indicated that part of his pique with Vosanibola related to the Minister's meeting with New Zealand Trade and Defense Minister Goff on June 22. Bainimarama said he participated sincerely in the reconciliation ceremony with Vosanibola, only to hear afterward from others that on the day before Vosanibola and Goff had endorsed a move by PM Qarase to seek a Supreme Court opinion on the proper role of the military under the Fiji Constitution. Bainimarama clearly felt betrayed, and he asked the Ambassador plaintively: "Why does the government think that is necessary?" He suggested that the notion of asking for a Supreme court ruling "doesn't make sense." When the Ambassador referred to Bainimarama's numerous public statements suggesting the RFMF has a major role to play in the governance of Fiji, including to remove the sitting government if necessary, and arguing that Fiji's Constitution mandates such an active political role for the military, Bainimarama denied ever suggesting the RFMF might remove the Qarase government. He then acknowledged having said the RFMF might have to "take over" if the government continued to advocate passage of the Reconciliation, Tolerance and Unity Bill (RTUB).

Support for Police Commissioner Hughes

19. (C) Interestingly, Bainimarama suggested to the Ambassador that recent media criticism of Police Commissioner Hughes (including a full-page article in the June 24 Fiji Post) was very unfair. Bainimarama said Hughes, an Aussie, has done an excellent job in improving the police force, but Qarase Government policies, like the RTUB bill, foster an atmosphere of lawlessness that undermines the police. (Comment: As recently as March, Bainimarama and his RFMF spokesman strongly criticized Hughes for allegedly taking part in an Australian-led effort to shrink the size of Fiji's

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military (reftel). We hear that when Bainimarama was in Australia for defense talks in mid-June, Australian senior officials made crystal clear their displeasure about Bainimarama's critical remarks. End comment.)

Comment: Reason for Optimism?

110. (C) The new-found spirit of cooperation between the RFMF and the government can be a very positive development. Just about everyone in Fiji, except perhaps for Commodore Bainimarama, has felt very nervous about a situation in which the military commander and the government have not been not on speaking terms. If personalities don't get in the way, and especially if Fiji's new multiparty cabinet holds, a real opportunity exists for the government and military to establish the groundwork for a much more stable and positive relationship.
DINGER